THE CENTURY MAGAZINE

Vol. 102 MAY, 1921 No. 1

The Post-Mortem Murder

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Author of "Main Street"

Illustration by R. F. Heinrich

I WENT to Kennuit to be quiet through the summer vacation. I was tired after my first year as associate professor, and I had to finish my "Life of Ben Jonson." Certainly the last thing I desired was that dying man in the hot room and the pile of scrawled booklets.

I boarded with Mrs. Nickerson in a cottage of silver-gray shingles under silver-gray poplars, heard only the harsh fiddling of locusts and the distant rage of the surf, looked out on a yard of bright wild grass and a jolly windmill weather-vane, and made notes about Ben Jonson. I was as secluded and happy as old Thoreau raising beans and feeling superior at Walden.

My fiancee,—Quinta Gates, sister of Professor Gates, and lovelier than ever in the delicate culture she had attained at thirty-seven,—Quinta urged me to join them at Fleet Harbor. It is agreeable to be with Quinta. While I cannot say that we are stirred to such absurd manifestations as kissing and hand-holding,—why any sensible person should care to hold a damp female hand is beyond me,—we do find each other inspiriting. But Fleet Harbor would be full of "summerites," dreadful young people in white flannels, singing their jazz ballads.

No, at thought of my spacious, leafy freedom I wriggled with luxury and settled down to an absorbed period when night and day glided into one ecstasy of dreaming study. Naturally, then, I was angry when I heard a puckery voice outside in the tiny hallway:

"Well, if he 's a professor, I got to see him."

A knock. I affected to ignore it. It was irritatingly repeated until I roared, "Well, well, well?" I am normally, I trust, a gentle person, but I desired to give them the impression of annoyance.

Mrs. Nickerson billowed in, squeaking:

"Mis' White from Lobster Pot Neck wants to see you."

Past her wriggled a pinch-faced, humorless-looking woman. She glared at Mrs. Nickerson, thrust her out, and shut the door. I could hear Mrs. Nickerson protesting, "Well, upon my word!"

I believe I rose and did the usual civilities. I remember this woman, Miss or Mrs. White, immediately ask-

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ing me, with extraordinary earnestness:

"Are you a professor?"

"I teach English."

"You write books?"

I pointed to a box of manuscript.

"Then, please, you got to help us. Byron Sanders is dying. He says he 's got to see a learned man to give him some important papers." Doubtless I betrayed hesitation, for I can remember her voice rising in creepy ululation: "Please! He 's dying—that good old man that never hurt nobody!"

I fluttered about the room to find my cap. I fretted that her silly phrase of "important papers" sounded like a melodrama, with maps of buried treasure, or with long-lost proofs that the chore boy is really the kidnapped son of royalty. But these unconscious defenses against the compulsion expressed in her face, with its taut and terrified oval of open mouth, were in vain. She mooned at me, she impatiently waited. I dabbled at my collar and lapels with my fingers, instead of decently brushing off the stains of smoking and scribbling. I came stumbling and breathless after her.

She walked rapidly, unspeaking, intense, and I followed six inches behind, bespelled by her red-and-black gingham waist and her chip of a brown hat. We slipped among the gray houses of the town, stumped into country stilly and shimmering with late afternoon. By a trail among long salty grasses we passed an inlet where sandpipers sprinted and horseshoe-crabs bobbed on the crisping ripples. We crossed a moorland to a glorious point of blowing grasses and sharp salt odor, with the waves of the harbor flickering beyond. In that resolute place my embarrassed awe was diluted, and I almost laughed as I wondered:

"What is this story-book errand? Ho, for the buried treasure! I 'll fit up a fleet, out of the six hundred dollars I have in the savings-bank, and find the pirates' skellingtons. 'Important papers!' I 'll comfort the poor dying gentleman, and be back in time for another page before supper. The harbor is enchanting. I really must have a sail this summer or go swimming."

My liveliness, uneasy at best in the presence of that frightened, fleeing woman, wavered when we had dipped down through a cranberry-bog and entered a still, hot woods of dying pines. They were dying, I tell you, as that old man in there was dying. The leaves were of a dry color of brick dust; they had fallen in heaps that crunched beneath my feet; the trunks were lean and black, with an irritation of branches; and all the dim alleys were choking with a dusty odor of decay. It was hot and hushed, and my throat tickled, my limbs dragged in a hopeless languor.

Through ugly trunks and red needles we came to a restrained dooryard and an ancient, irregular house, a dark house, very sullen. No one had laughed there these many years. The windows were draped. The low porch between the main structure and a sagging ell was drifted with the pine-needles. My companion's tread was startling and indecent on the flapping planks. She held open the door. I hesitated. I was not annoyed now; I was afraid, and I knew not of what I was afraid.

Prickly with unknown disquietude, I entered. We traversed a hall choked with relics of the old shipping days of Kennuit: a whale's vertebra, a crib-

bage-board carved in a walrus-tusk, a Chinese screen of washed-out gold pagodas on faded, weary black. We climbed a narrow stair over which jutted, like a secret trap-door, the corner of a mysterious chamber above. My companion opened a door on the upper hall and croaked, "In there."

I went in slowly. I am not sure now, after two years, but I think I planned to run out again, to flee downstairs, to defend myself with that ivory tusk if I should be attacked by—whatever was lurking in that shadowy, silent place. As I edged in, about me crept an odor of stale air and vile medicines and ancient linen. The shutters were fast; the light was grudging. I was actually relieved when I saw in the four-poster bed a pitiful, vellum-faced old man, and the worst monster I had to face was normal illness.

I have learned that Byron Sanders was only seventy-one then, but he seemed ninety. He was enormous. He must have been hard to care for. His shoulders, in the mended linen nightgown thrust up above the patchwork comforter, were bulky; his neck was thick; his head a shiny dome—an Olympian, majestic even in dissolution.

The room had been lived in too long. It was a whirl of useless things: staggering chairs, clothes in piles, greasy medicine-bottles, and a vast writing-desk pouring out papers, and dingy books with bindings of speckled brown. Amid the litter, so still that she seemed part of it, I was startled to discern another woman. Who she may have been I have never learned.

The man was ponderously turning in bed, peering at me through the shaky light.

"You are a professor?" he wheezed.

"That depends upon what you mean, sir. I teach English. I am not—"

"You understand poetry, essays, literary history?"

"I am supposed to."

"I 'm kind of a colleague of yours. Byron—" He stopped, choked frightfully. The repressed woman beside the bed, moving with stingy patience, wiped his lips. "My name is Byron Sanders. For forty years, till a year ago, I edited the 'Kennuit Beacon.'"

The nauseating vanity of man! In that reverent hour, listening to the entreaties of a dying man, I was yet piqued at having my stripped athletic scholarship compared to editing the "Beacon," with its patent-medicine advertisements, its two straggly columns of news about John Brown's cow and Jim White's dory.

His eyes trusting me, Byron Sanders went on:

"Can't last long. It 's come quicker—no time to plan. I want you to take the literary remains of my father. He was not a good man, but he was a genius. I have his poetry here, and the letters. I have n't read them for years, and—too late—give them to world. You must—"

He was desperately choking. The still woman crept up, thrust into my hands a box of papers and a pile of note-books which had been lying on the bed.

"You must go," she muttered. "Say, 'Yes,' and go. He can't stand any more."

"Will you?" the broken giant wailed to me, a stranger!

"Yes, yes, indeed; I 'll give them to the world," I mumbled, while the woman pushed me toward the door.

I fled down the stairs, through the coppery pine-woods, up to the blithe

headland that was swept by the sea-breeze.

I knew, of course, what the "poetry" of that poor "genius" his father would be—Christmas doggerel and ditties about "love" and "dove," "heart" and "must part." I was, to be honest, irritated. I wanted to take this debris back to Mr. Sanders, and that was the one thing I could not do. For once I was sensible: I took it home and tried to forget it.

In the next week's "Kennuit Beacon," discovered on Mrs. Nickerson's parlor-table, crowning a plush album, I read that Byron Sanders, "the founder and for many years the highly esteemed editor of this paper," had died.

I sought relatives to whom I could turn over his father's oddments. There was no one; he was a widower and childless. For months the bothersome papers were lost in my desk, back at the university. On the opening day of the Christmas vacation I remembered that I had not read a word of them. I was to go to Quinta Gates's for tea at a quarter to five, and to her serene companionship I looked forward as, in a tired, after-term desultoriness, I sat down to glance at Jason Sanders's caterwaulings. That was at four. It was after nine when the flabby sensation of hunger brought me back to my room and the dead fire.

In those five hours I had discovered a genius. The poetry at which I had so abominably sneered was minted glory.

I stood up, and in that deserted dormitory I shouted, and listened to the tremor of the lone sound and defiantly shouted again. That I was "excited" is too pallid a word. My life of Jonson could go hang! I was selfish about it: it meant fame for me. But I think something higher than selfishness had already come into my devotion to Jason Sanders; something of the creator's passion and the father's pride.

I was hungry enough, but I walked the room contemptuous of it. I felt unreal. 1918 was fantastically unreal. I had for hours been veritably back in 1850. It was all there; manuscripts which had not been touched since 1850, which still held in their wrinkles the very air of seventy years ago: a diary; daguerreotypes; and letters, preserved like new in the darkness, from Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and the young Tennyson!

The diary had been intermittently kept for fifteen years. It was outline enough for me to reconstruct the story of Jason Sanders, born at Kennuit in 1825, probably died in Greece in 1853.

§ 2.

Between Cape Cod and the ocean is a war sinister and incessant. Here and there the ocean has gulped a farm, or a lighthouse reared on a cliff, but at Kennuit the land has been the victor. To-day there are sandy flats and tepid channels where a hundred years ago was an open harbor brilliant with a hundred sails, crackling with tidings from the Banks, proud of whalers back from years of cruising off Siberia and of West Indiamen pompous with rum and sugar and the pest.

Captain Bethuel Sanders, master and owner of the *Sally S.*, was on a voyage out of Kennuit to Pernambuco when his only child, Jason Sanders, was born. He never came back. In every Cape Cod burying-ground, beside the meeting-house, there are a score of headstones with "Lost at sea." There is one, I know now, at Kennuit for Bethuel Sanders.

His widow, daughter of a man of God who for many years had been pastor at Truro, was a tight, tidy, capable woman. Bethuel left her a competence. She devoted herself to keeping house and to keeping her son from going to sea. He was not to die as his father had, perhaps alone, last man on a wave-smashed brig. Theirs was a neat, unkindly cottage with no windows on the harbor side. The sailors' women-folks did not greatly esteem the view to sea, for thither went the strong sons who would never return. In a cottage with a low wall blank toward the harbor lived Mrs. Sanders, ardently loving her son, bitterly restraining him. Jason was obsessed by her. She was mother, father, sweetheart, teacher, tyrant. He stroked her cheeks, and he feared her eye, which was a frozen coal when she caught him lying.

In the first pages of Jason's diary, when he was only thirteen, he raged that while his schoolmates were already off to the Banks or beholding, as cabin-boys, the shining Azores, he was kept at his lessons, unmanned, in apron-strings. Resources of books he had from his parson grandsire: Milton, Jeremy Taylor, Pope. If the returned adventurers sneered at him, he dusted their jackets. He must have been hardy and reasonably vicious. He curtly records that he beat Peter Williams, son of the Reverend Abner Williams, "till he could scarce move," and that for this ferocity he was read out of meeting. He became a hermit, the village "bad boy."

He was at once scorned as a "softy" by his mates because he did not go to sea, dreaded by their kin because he was a marking fighter, bombarded by his Uncle Ira because he would not become a grocer, and chided by his mother because he had no calling to the ministry. Nobody, apparently, took the trouble to understand him. The combination of reading and solitude led him inevitably to scribbling. On new-washed Cape Cod afternoons, when grasses rustled on the cream-shadowed dunes, he sat looking out to sea, chin in hand, staring at ardent little waves and lovely sails that bloomed and vanished as the schooners tacked; and through evenings rhythmic with the surf he sought with words which should make him enviable to justify himself and his mocked courage.

At twenty he ran off to sea on a fishing schooner.

Twenty he was and strong, but when he returned his mother larruped him. Apparently he submitted; his comment in the famous diary is: "Mother kissed me in welcome, then, being a woman of whimsies somewhat distasteful to a man of my sober nature, she stripped off my jacket and lashed me with a strip of whalebone long and surprisingly fanged. I shall never go a-whaling if so very little of a whale can be so very unamiable."

This process neatly finished, Mrs. Sanders—she was a swift and diligent woman—immediately married the young bandit off to a neighbor woman four years his senior, a comely woman, pious, and gifted with dullness. Within the year was born a son, the Byron Sanders whom I saw dying as a corpulent elder.

That was in 1847, and Jason was twenty-two.

He went to work—dreaming and the painful carving of beautiful words not being work—in the Mammoth Store

and Seamen's Outfitters. He was discharged for, imprimis, being drunk and abusive; further, stealing a knife of the value of two shillings. For five or six years he toiled in a sail-loft. I fancy that between stitchings of thick canvas he read poetry, a small book hidden in the folds of a topsail, and with a four-inch needle he scratched on shingles a plan of Troy. He was discharged now and then for roistering, and now and then was grudgingly hired again.

I hope that nothing I have said implies that I consider Jason a young man of virtue. I do not. He drank Jamaica rum, he stole strawberries, his ways with the village girls were neither commendable nor in the least commended, and his temper was such that he occasionally helped himself to a fight with sailors, and regularly, with or without purpose, thrashed the unfortunate Peter Williams, son of the Reverend Abner.

Once he betrayed a vice far meaner. A certain Boston matron, consort of a highly esteemed merchant, came summering to Kennuit, first of the tennis-yelping hordes who now infest the cape and interrupt the meditations of associate professors. This worthy lady was literary, and doubtless musical and artistic. She discovered that Jason was a poet. She tried to patronize him; in a highfalutin way she commanded him to appear next Sunday, to read aloud and divert her cousins from Boston. For this she would give him a shilling and what was left of the baked chicken. He gravely notes: "I told her to go to the devil. She seemed put out." The joke is that three weeks later he approached the good matron with a petition to be permitted to do what he had scorned. She rightly, he records without comment, "showed me the door."

No, he was not virtuous save in bellicose courage, and he was altogether casual about deserting his wife and child when, the year after his mother died, he ran away to the Crimean War. But I think one understands that better in examining, as I have examined with microscope and aching eye, the daguerreotypes of Jason and his wife and boy.

Straight-nosed and strong-lipped was Jason at twenty-six or seven. Over his right temple hung an impatient lock. He wore the high, but open and flaring, collar of the day, the space in front filled with the soft folds of a stock. A fluff of side-whiskers along the jaw set off his resoluteness of chin and brow. His coat was long-skirted and heavy, with great collar and wide lapels, a cumbrous garment, yet on him as graceful as a cloak. But his wife! Her eyes stared, and her lips, though for misery and passionate prayer they had dark power, seem in the mirrory old picture to have had no trace of smiles. Their son was dumpy. As I saw him dying there in the pine woods, Byron Sanders appeared a godly man and intelligent; but at six or seven he was pudding-faced, probably with a trick of howling. In any case, with or without reason, Jason foully deserted them.

In 1853, at the beginning of the struggle between Russia and Turkey that was to develop into the Crimean War, Greece planned to invade Turkey. Later, to prevent alliance between Greece and Russia, the French and English forces held Piræus; but for a time Greece seemed liberated.

Jason's diary closes with a note:

To-morrow I leave this place of sand and sandy brains; make by friend Bearse's porgy boat for Long Island, thence to New York and ship for Piræus, for the glory of Greece and the memory of Byron. How better can a man die? And perhaps some person of intelligence there will comprehend me. Thank fortune my amiable spouse knows naught. If ever she finds this, may she grant forgiveness, as I grant it to her!

That is all—all save a clipping from the "Lynmouth News Letter" of seven years later announcing that as no word of Mr. Jason Sanders had come since his evanishment, his widow was petitioning the court to declare him legally dead.

This is the pinchbeck life of Jason Sanders. He lived not in life, but in his writing, and that is tinct with genius. Five years before Whitman was known he was composing what today we call "free verse." There are in it impressions astoundingly like Amy Lowell. The beauty of a bitter tide-scourged garden and of a bitter sea-scourged woman who walks daily in that sterile daintiness is one of his themes, and the poem is as radiant and as hard as ice.

Then the letters.

Jason had sent his manuscripts to the great men of the day. From most of them he had non-committal acknowledgments. His only encouragement came from Edgar Allan Poe, who in 1849, out of the depths of his own last discouragement, wrote with sympathy:

I pledge you my heart that you have talent. You will go far if you can endure hatred and disgust, forgetfulness and bitter bread, blame for your most valorous and for your weakness and meekness, the praise of matrons and the ladylike.

That letter was the last thing I read before dawn on Christmas day.

On the first train after Christmas I hastened down to the winter-clutched cape.

§ 3

As Jason had died sixty-five years before, none but persons of eighty or more would remember him. One woman of eighty-six I found, but beyond, "Heh? Whas sat?" she confided only: "Jassy Sanders was a terror to snakes. Run away from his family, that 's what he done! Poetry? Him write poetry? Why, he was a sailmaker!"

I heard then of Abiathar Gould, eighty-seven years old, and already become a myth streaked with blood and the rust of copper bottoms. He had been a wrecker, suspected of luring ships ashore with false lights in order that he might plunder them with his roaring mates. He had had courage enough, plunging in his whaleboat through the long swells after a storm, but mercy he had not known. He was not in Kennuit itself; he lived down by the Judas Shoals, on a lean spit of sand running seven miles below Lobster Pot Neck.

How could one reach him? I asked Mrs. Nickerson.

Oh, that was easy enough: one could walk! Yes, and one did walk, five miles against a blast whirling with snow, grinding with teeth of sand. I cursed with surprising bitterness, and planned to give up cigarettes and to do patent chest exercises. I wore Mr. Aaron Bloomer's coonskin coat, Mrs. Nickerson's gray flannel muffler. David

Dill's fishing-boots, and Mrs. Antonia Sparrow's red flannel mittens; but, by the gods, the spectacles were my own, and mine the puffing, the cramped calves, and the breath that froze white on that itchy collar! Past an inlet with grasses caught in the snow-drifted ice; along the frozen beach, which stung my feet at every pounding step; among sand-dunes, which for a moment gave blessed shelter; out again into the sweep of foam-slavering wind, the bellow of the surf, I went.

I sank all winded on the icy step of Captain Abiathar Gould's bachelor shack.

He was not deaf and he was not dull at eighty-seven. He came to the door, looked down on me studiously, and grunted:

"What do you want? D' yuh bring me any hootch?"

I had n't. There was much conversation bearing on that point while I broiled and discovered new muscles by his stove. He had only one bunk, a swirl of coiled blankets and comforters and strips of gunny-sacking. I did not care to spend the night; Captain Gould cared even less. I had to be back. I opened:

"Cap'n, you knew Jason Sanders?"

"Sanders? I knew Byron Sanders, and Gideon Sanders of Wellfleet and Cephas Sanders of Falmouth and Bessie Sanders, but I never knew no Jason —oh, wa'n't he Byron's pa? Sure I remember him. Eight or nine years older 'n I was. Died in foreign parts. I was a boy on the *Dancing Jig* when he went fishing. Only time he ever went. Wa'n't much of a fisherman."

"Yes, but what do you remember—"

"Don't remember nothing. Jassy never went with us fellows; had his nose in a book. Some said he was a good fighter; I dunno."

"But did n't you—how did he talk, for instance?"

"Talk? Talked like other folks, I suppose. But he wa'n't a fisherman, like the rest of us. Oh, one time he tanned my hide for tearing up some papers with writin' on 'em that I swiped for gun-wadding."

"What did he say then?"

"He said—"

On second thought it may not be discreet to report what Jason said.

Beyond that Captain Gould testified only:

"Guess I kind of get him mixed up with the other fellows; good many years ago. But"—he brightened—"I recollect he wa'n't handy round a schooner. No, he wa'n't much of a fisherman."

When I got back to Kennuit my nose was frozen.

No newspaper had been published in Kennuit before 1877, and I unearthed nothing more. Yet this very blankness made Jason Sanders my own province. I knew incomparably more about him than any other living soul. He was at once my work, my spiritual ancestor, and my beloved son. I had a sense of the importance and nobility of all human life such as—I acknowledge sadly—I had never acquired in dealing with cubbish undergraduates. I wondered how many Jasons might be lost in the routine of my own classes. I forgot my studies of Ben Jonson. I was obsessed by Jason. I was, I fancy, like a jitney pilot turned racing driver.

Quinta Gates,—I don't know,—when I met her at the president's reception in February, she said I had been neglecting her. At the time I

supposed that she was merely teasing; but I wonder now. She was—oh, too cool; she had n't quite the frankness I had come to depend on in her. I don't care. Striding the dunes with Jason, I could n't return to Quinta and the discussion of sonatas in a lavender twilight over thin tea-cups.

§ 4

I gave Jason Sanders to the world in a thumping article in "The Weekly Gonfalon."

Much of it was reprinted in the New York "Courier's" Sunday literary section, with Jason's picture, and—I note it modestly—with mine, the rather interesting picture of me in knickers sitting beside Quinta's tennis-court. Then the New York "Gem" took him up. It did not mention me or my article. It took Jason under its own saffron wing and crowed, at the head of a full-page Sunday article:

VICIOUS EUROPEAN CONSPIRACY HIDES DEATH OF GREATEST AMERICAN BARD

I was piqued by their theft, but I was also amused to see the creation of a new mythical national hero. "The Gem" had Jason sailing nine of the seven seas, and leading his crew to rescue a most unfortunate Christian maiden who had been kidnapped by the Turks—at Tangier! About the little matter of deserting his wife and son "The Gem" was absent-minded. According to them, Jason's weeping helpmate bade him, "Go where duty calls you," whereupon he kissed her, left her an agreeable fortune, and departed with banners and bands. But "The Gem's" masterpiece was the interview with Captain Abiathar Gould, whose conversational graces I have portrayed. In "The Gem" Captain Gould rhapsodizes:

> We boys was a wild lot, sailing on them reckless ships. But Captain Jason Sanders was, well, sir, he was like a god to us. Not one of the crew would have dared, like he done, to spring overboard in a wintry blast to rescue the poor devils capsized in a dory, and yet he was so quiet and scholarly, always a-reading at his poetry books between watches. Oh, them was wonderful days on the barkantine *Dancing Jig!*

"The Gem" reporter must have taken down to Abiathar some of the "hootch" I failed to bring.

I was—to be honest, I was unacademically peeved. My hero was going out of my hands, and I wanted him back. I got him back. No one knew what had happened to Jason after he went to Greece, but I found out. With a friend in the European history department I searched all available records of Greek history in 1853–54. I had faith that the wild youngster would tear his way through the dryest pages of reports.

We discovered that in '54, when the French and English occupied Piræus, a mysterious Lieutenant Jasmin Sandec appeared as a popular hero in Athens. Do you see the resemblance? Jasmin Sandec—Jason Sanders. The romantic boy had colored his drab Yankee name. Nobody quite knew who Lieutenant Sandec was. He was not Greek. The French said he was English; the English said he was French. He led a foray of rollicking young Athenians against the French lines; he was captured and incontinently shot. After his death an American sea-captain identified Lieutenant Sandec as a cousin of his! He

testified that Sandec was not his name, though what his name was the skipper did not declare. He ended his statement:

"My cousin comes from the town of Kennebunkport, and has by many been thought to be insane."

Need I point out how easily the Greek scribe confused Kennebunkport with Kennuit? As easily as the miserable cousinly captain confused insanity with genius.

Do you see the picture of Jason's death? Was it not an end more fitting than molding away in a sail-loft, or becoming a grocer, a parson, an associate professor? The Grecian afternoon, sun glaring on whitewashed wall, the wine-dark sea, the marble-studded hills of Sappho, and a youth, perhaps in a crazy uniform, French shako and crimson British coat, Cape Cod breeches, and Grecian boots, lounging dreamily, not quite understanding; a line of soldiers with long muskets; a volley, and that fiery flesh united to kindred dust from the bright body of Helen and the thews of Ajax.

The report of these facts about Jason's fate I gave in my second article in "The Gonfalon." By this time people were everywhere discussing Jason. It was time for my book.

Briefly, it was a year's work. It contained all his writing and the lives of three generations of Sanderses. It had a reasonable success, and it made of Jason's notoriety a solid fame. So, in 1919, sixty-five years after his death, he began to live.

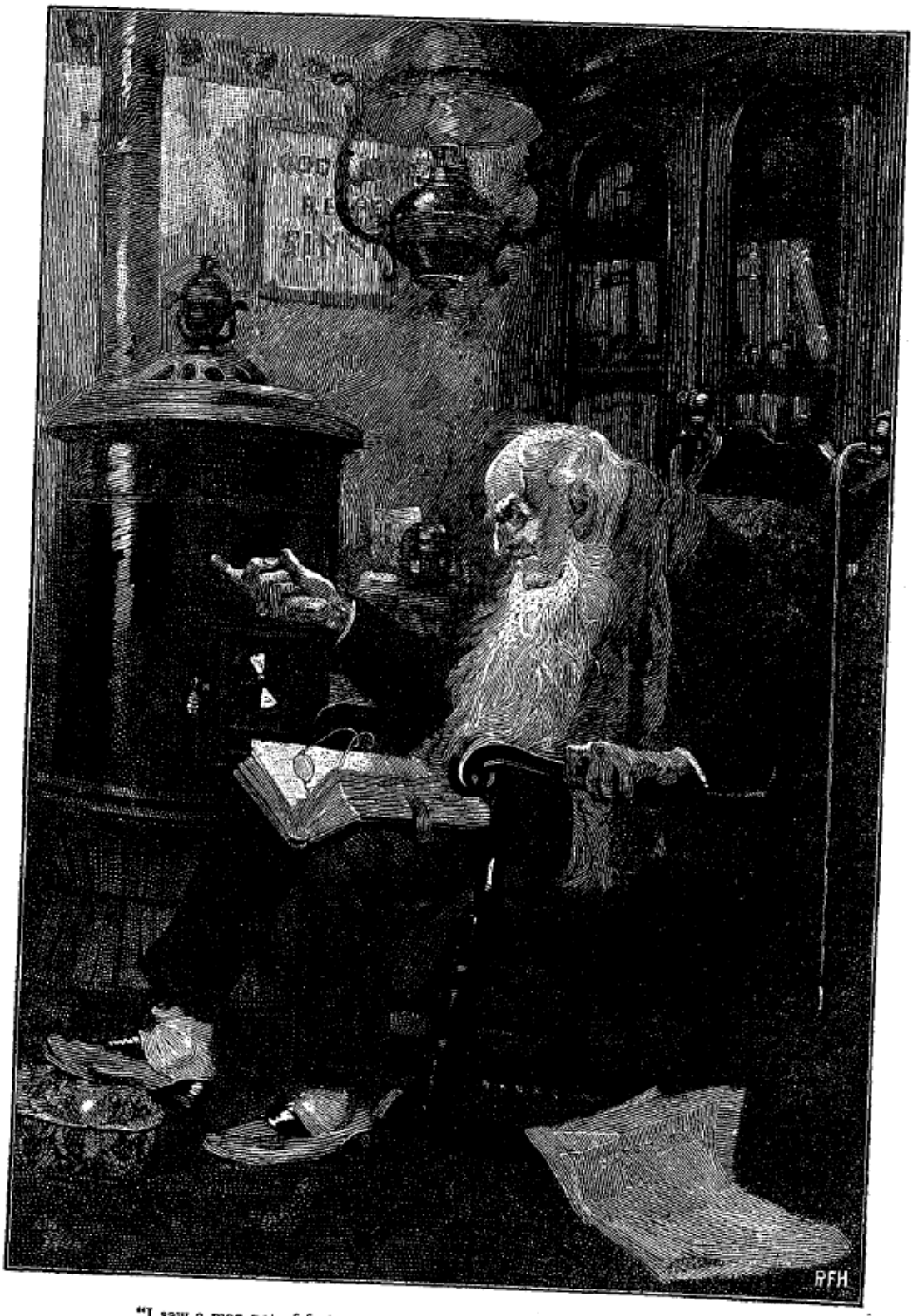
An enterprising company published his picture in a large carbon print which appeared on school-room walls beside portraits of Longfellow, Lowell, and Washington. So veritably was he living that I saw him! In New York, at a pageant representing the great men of America, he was enacted by a clever young man made up to the life, and shown as talking to Poe. That, of course, was inaccurate. Then he appeared as a character in a novel; he was condescendingly mentioned by a celebrated visiting English poet; his death was made the subject of a painting; a motion-picture person inquired as to the possibilities of "filming" him, and he was, in that surging tide of new living, suddenly murdered!

§ 5

The poison which killed Jason the second time was in a letter to "The Gonfalon" from Whitney A. Edgerton, Ph.D., adjunct professor of English literature in Melanchthon College.

Though I had never met Edgerton, we were old combatants. The dislike had started with my stern, but just, review of his edition of Herrick. Edgerton had been the only man who had dared to sneer at Jason. In a previous letter in "The Gonfalon" he had hinted that Jason had stolen his imagery from Chinese lyrics, a pretty notion, since Jason probably never knew that the Chinese had any literature save laundry checks. But now I quote his letter:

I have seen reproductions of a very bad painting called "The Death of Jason Sanders," portraying that admirable young person as being shot in Greece. It happens that Mr. Sanders was not shot in Greece. He deserved to be, but he was n't. Jason Sanders was not Jasmin Sandec. The changing of his own honest name to such sugar-candy was the sort of thing he would have done. But he did n't do it. What kept Jason from heroically dying in Greece in 1854 was the misfortune that from December,



"I saw a man not of forty, . . . but astoundingly old, an ancient dominie"

'53, to April, '58, he was doing time in the Delaware State Penitentiary for the proved crimes of arson and assault with intent to kill. His poetic cell in Delaware was the nearest he ever, in his entire life, came to Greece. Yours, etc.,

WHITNEY EDGERTON.

The editor of "The Gonfalon" telegraphed me the contents of the letter just too late for me to prevent its printing, and one hour later I was bound for Delaware, forgetting, I am afraid, that Quinta had invited me to dinner. I knew that I would "show up," as my students say, this Edgerton,

The warden of the penitentiary was interested. He helped me. He brought out old registers. We were thorough. We were too thorough. We read that Jason Sanders of Kennuit, Massachusetts, married, profession sailmaker, was committed to the penitentiary in December, 1853, for arson and murderous assault, and that he was incarcerated for over four years.

In the Wilmington library, in the files of a newspaper long defunct, I found an item dated, November, 1853:

> What appears to have been a piece of wretched scoundrelism was perpetrated at the house of Mr. Palatinus, a highly esteemed farmer residing near Christiansburg, last Thursday. Mr. Palatinus gave food and shelter to a tramp calling himself Sanders, in return for some slight labor. The second evening the fellow found some spirits concealed in the barn, became intoxicated, demanded money from Mr. Palatinus, struck him, cast the lamp upon the floor, and set fire to the dwelling. He has been arrested and is held for trial. He is believed to have been a sailor on Cape Cod. Where are our officers of the peace that such dangerous criminals should roam unapprehended?

I did not make any especial haste to communicate my discoveries.

It was a New York "Gem" correspondent who did that. His account was copied rather widely.

The pictures of Jason were taken down from school-room walls.

I returned to the university. I was sustained only by Quinta's faith. As she sat by the fire, chin resting against fragile fingers, she asserted, "Perhaps there has been some mistake." That inspired me. I left her, too hastily, it may be, but she is ever one to understand and forgive. I fled to my rooms, stopping only to telephone to my friend of the history department. He assured me that there was a common Greek family name, Palatainos. You will note its resemblance to Palatinus! At this I jiggled in the drug-store telephone-booth and joyfully beat on the resounding walls, and looked out to see one of my own students, purchasing a bar of chocolate, indecently grinning at me. I sought to stalk out, but I could not quiet my rejoicing feet.

I began my new letter to "The Gonfalon" at ten in the evening. I finished it at five of a cold morning. I remember myself as prowling through the room with no dignity, balancing myself ridiculously on the brass bar at the foot of my bed, beating my desk with my fists, lighting and hurling down cigarettes.

In my letter I pointed out—I virtually proved—that the Delaware farmer's name was not Palatinus, but Palatainos. He was a Greek. He could not have sheltered Jason "in return for some slight labor," because this was December, when farm-work was slackest. No, this Palatainos was an agent of the Greek revolutionists.

Jason was sent from New York to see him. Can you not visualize it?

The ardent youngster arrives; is willing to take from Palatainos any orders, however desperate. And he finds that Palatainos is a traitor, is in the pay of the Turks! Sitting in the kitchen, by a fireplace of whitewashed bricks, Palatainos leers upon the horrified Yankee lad with the poisonous sophistication of an international spy. He bids Jason spy upon the Greeks in America. Staggered, Jason goes feebly up to bed. All next day he resists the traitor's beguilement. Palatainos plies him with brandy. The poet sits brooding; suddenly he springs up, righteously attacks Palatainos, the lamp is upset, the house partly burned, and Jason, a stranger and friendless, is arrested by the besotted country constable. He was, in prison, as truly a martyr to freedom as if he had veritably been shot in a tender-colored Grecian afternoon!

My reconstruction of the history was—though now I was so distressed that I could take but little pride in it—much quoted from "The Gonfalon" not only in America, but abroad. The "Mercure de France" mentioned it, inexcusably misspelling my name. I turned to the tracing of Jason's history after his release from the penitentiary, since now I did not know when and where he actually had died. I was making plans when there appeared another letter from Whitney Edgerton, the secret assassin of Jason. He snarled that Palatinus's name was not Palatainos. It was Palatinus. He was not a Greek; he was a Swede.

I wrote to Edgerton, demanded his proofs, his sources for all this information. He did not answer. He answered none of my half-dozen letters.

"The Gonfalon" announced that it had been deceived in regard to Jason, that it would publish nothing more about him. So for the third time Jason Sanders was killed, and this time he seemed likely to remain dead.

Shaky, impoverished by my explorations on Cape Cod and in Delaware, warned by the dean that I should do well to stick to my teaching and cease "these unfortunate attempts to gain notoriety," I slunk into quiet classwork, seemingly defeated. Yet all the while I longed to know when and where Jason really had died. Might he not have served valorously in the American Civil War? But how was I to know? Then came my most extraordinary adventure in the service of Jason Sanders.

§ 6

I went to Quinta's for tea. I have wondered sometimes if Quinta may not have become a bit weary of my speculations about Jason. I did not mean to bore her; I tried not to: but I could think of nothing else, and she alone was patient with me.

"How—how—how can I force Edgerton to tell all he knows?" I said with a sigh.

"Go see him!" Quinta was impatient.

"Why, you know I can't afford to, with all my savings gone, and Edgerton way out in Nebraska."

She shocked me by quitting the room. She came back holding out a check—for three hundred dollars! The Gateses are wealthy, but naturally I could not take this. I shook my head.

"Please!" she said sharply. "Let 's get it over."

I was suddenly hopeful.

"Then you do believe in Jason?

I 'd thought you were almost indifferent to him."

"I—" It flared out, that sound. She went on compactly: "Let 's not talk about it, please. Now tell me, did n't you think they made a mistake at the symphony—"

I had a not at all pleasant conference with the dean before I took my train for Melanchthon, Nebraska.

I had a plan. This was toward the end of the academic year 1919–20. I would pretend to be a chap who, after working in offices, that sort of thing, desired to begin graduate work in English, but had first to make up for the courses he had forgotten since college. I wanted the celebrated Dr. Whitney Edgerton to tutor me. I would lure him into boarding me at his house; a young professor like Edgerton would be able to use the money. Once dwelling there, it would be easy enough to search his study, to find what histories or letters had furnished his secret knowledge of Jason.

I adopted as *nom de guerre* the name Smith. That was, perhaps, rather ingenious, since it is a common name, and therefore unlikely to arouse attention. It was all reasonable, and should have been easy.

But when, in Melanchthon, I was directed to Edgerton's house, I perceived that, instead of being a poor devil, he was uncomfortably rich. His was a monstrous Georgian house, all white columns and dormers and iron window-railings and brick terrace and formal gardens. Reluctantly, I gained entrance, and addressed myself to Edgerton.

He was a square-built, pompous, rimless-eye-glassed, youngish man. His study was luxurious, with velvet curtains at the windows, with a vast desk, with built-in cases containing books I yearned to possess; a vast apartment, all white and tender blue, against which my two patchy rooms in Hendrik Hall seemed beggary. I had expected to have to conceal hatred, but instead I was embarrassed. Yet by the gods it was I, the shabby scholar, who had created Jason, and this silken, sulky dilettante who without reason had stabbed him!

While I peeped about, I was telling Edgerton, perhaps less deftly than I had planned, of my desire to be tutored.

He answered:

"You 're very complimentary, I 'm sure, but I 'm afraid it 's impossible. I 'll recommend you to some one— By the way, what was your college?"

Heaven knows how it popped into my head, but I recalled an obscure and provincial school, Titus College, of which I knew nothing.

He lightened.

"Oh, really? Did you know I had my first instructorship in Titus? Have n't had any news from there for years. How is President Dolson, and Mrs. Siebel? Oh, and how is dear old Cassaworthy?"

May the trustees of Titus College forgive me! I had President Dolson sick of a fever, and Cassaworthy—professor, janitor, village undertaker, or whatever he was—taking to golf. As for Mrs. Siebel, she 'd given me a cup of tea only a few months ago. Edgerton seemed astonished. I have often wondered whether Mrs. Siebel would actually be most likely to serve tea, gin, or vitriol.

Edgerton got rid of me. He amiably kicked me out. He smiled, gave me the name of a "suitable tutor," mesmerized me toward the door, and did not invite me to return. I sat on a

bench in the Melanchthon station. Apparently I had come from the Atlantic seaboard to Nebraska to sit on this broken bench and watch an undesirable citizen spit at a box of sawdust.

I spent the night at a not agreeable tavern or hotel, and next day I again called on Edgerton. I had surmised that he would be bored by the sight of me. He was. I begged him to permit me to look over his library. Impatiently, he left me alone, hinting, "When you go out, be sure and close the front door."

With the chance of some one entering, it would not have been safe to scurry through his desk and his ingenious cabinets in search of data regarding Jason. But while I stood apparently reading, with a pen-knife I so loosened the screws in a window-catch that the window could be thrust up from outside.

I was going to burglarize the study.

That night, somewhat after twelve, I left my room in the hotel, yawned about the office, pretended to glance at the ragged magazines, sighed to the drowsy night clerk, "I think I 'll have some fresh air before I retire," and sauntered out. In my inner pocket were a screw-driver and a small electric torch which I had that afternoon purchased at a hardware shop. I knew from the fiction into which I had sometimes dipped that burglars find these torches and screw-drivers, or "jimmies," of value in their work.

I endeavored, as I stole about the streets, to assume an expression of ferocity, to intimidate whoever might endeavor to interrupt me. For this purpose I placed my spectacles in my pocket and disarrayed my bow-tie.

I was, perhaps, thrown off my normal balance. For the good name of Jason Sanders I would risk all of serene repute that had been precious to me. So I, who had been a lecturer to respectful students, edged beneath the cottonwoods, slipped across a lawn, crawled over a wire fence, and stood in the garden of Whitney Edgerton. It was fenced and walled on all sides save toward the street. That way, then, I should have to run in case of eruption —out into the illumination of a street lamp. I might be very prettily trapped. Suddenly I was a-tremble, utterly incredulous that I should be here.

I could n't do it.

I was menaced from every side. Was n't that some one peering from an upper window of the house? Did n't a curtain move in the study? What was that creak behind me? I, who had never in my life spoken to a policeman save to ask a direction, had thrust myself in here, an intruder, to be treated like a common vagrant, to be shamed and roughly handled. As I grudgingly swayed toward the study windows I was uneasy before imaginary eyes. I do not remember a fear of being shot. It was something vaguer and more enfeebling: it was the staring disapproval of all my civilization, schools, churches, banks, the courts, and Quinta. But I came to the central window of the study, the window whose catch I had loosened.

I could n't do it.

It had seemed so easy in fiction; but crawl in there? Into the darkness? Face the unknown? Shin over the sill like a freshman? Sneak and pilfer like a mucker?

I touched the window; I think I tried to push it up. It was beyond my strength.

Disgust galvanized me. I to thieve

from the thief who had slain Jason Sanders? Never! I had a right to know his information; I had a right. By heavens! I 'd shake it out of him; I 'd face, beat, kill that snobbish hound. I remember running about the corner of the house, jabbing the button of the bell, bumping the door panels with sore palms.

A light, and Edgerton's voice:

"What is it? What is it?"

"Quick! A man hurt! Motor accident!" I bellowed.

He opened the door. I was on him, pushing him back into the hall, demanding.

"I want everything you have about Jason Sanders!" I noticed then that he had a revolver. I am afraid I hurt his wrist. Somewhat after, when I had placed him in a chair in the study, I said: "Where did you get your data? And where did Sanders die?"

"You must be this idiot that 's been responsible for the Sanders folderol," he was gasping.

"Will you be so good as to listen? I am going to kill you unless you give me what I wish, and immediately."

"Wh-what! See here!"

I don't remember. It 's curious; my head aches when I try to recall that part. I think I must have struck him, yet that seems strange, for certainly he was larger than I and better fed. But I can hear him piping:

"This is an outrage! You 're insane! But if you insist, I had all my facts about Sanders from Peter Williams, a clergyman out in Yancey, Colorado."

"Let me see your letters from him."

"Is that necessary?"

"Do you think I 'd trust you?"

"Well, I have only one letter here. The others are in my safe-deposit vault. Williams first wrote to me when he read my letter criticizing your articles. He has given me a good many details. He apparently has some reason to hate the memory of Sanders. Here 's his latest epistle, some more facts about Sanders's delightful poetic career."

One glance showed me that this was indeed the case. The sheet which Edgerton handed me had inartistically printed at the top, "Rev. Peter F. Williams, Renewalist Brotherhood Congregation, Yancey, Colo.," and one sentence was, "Before this, Sanders's treatment of women in Kennuit was disgraceful—can't be too strongly condem'd."

I had the serpent of whose venom Edgerton was but the bearer!

I backed out, left Edgerton. He said a silly thing, which shows that he was at least as flustered as I was:

"Good-by, Lieutenant Sandec!"

I was certain that he would have me apprehended if I returned to my hotel, even for so long as would be needed to gather my effects. Instantly, I decided to abandon my luggage, hasten out of town. Fortunately, I had with me neither my other suit nor the fitted bag which Quinta had given me. Traversing only side streets, I sped out of town by the railway track. Then I was glad of the pocket flash-light, which, outside the study window, had seemed absurd. I sat on the railway embankment. I can still feel the grittiness of sharp-cornered cinders and cracked rock, still see the soggy pile of rotting logs beside the embankment upon which my flash-light cast a milky beam as I switched it on in order that I might study Peter Williams's letter.

Already I had a clue.

Peter Williams was also the name of that son of the Reverend Abner

Williams of Kennuit whom Jason had often trounced. I wished that he had trounced him oftener and more roundly. The Reverend Abner had hurled Jason out of his church. All this would naturally institute a feud between Jason and the Williamses. There might have been additional causes, perchance rivalry for a girl.

Well! The Reverend Peter Williams's letter to Edgerton was typewritten. That modernity would indicate, in a village parson, a man not over forty years old. Was it not logical to guess that Peter Williams of Colorado was the grandson of Peter Williams of Kennuit, and that he had utilized information long possessed by the whole tribe of the Williamses to destroy his grandsire's enemy, Jason?

By dawn I was on a way-train; in the afternoon of the next day I was in Yancey, Colorado.

§ 7

I found the Renewalist parsonage, residence of the Reverend Peter Williams, to be a small, dun-colored cottage on a hill-crest. I strode thither, vigorous with rage. I knocked. I faced a blank Teutonic maid. I demanded to see Mr. Williams.

I was admitted to his rustic study. I saw a man not of forty, as his letter had suggested, but astoundingly old, an ancient dominie, as sturdy as a bison, with a bursting immensity of white beard. He was sitting in a hollowed rocker by the stove.

"Well?" said he.

"Is this the Reverend Peter Williams?"

"It be."

"May I sit down?"

"You can."

I sat calmly in a small, mean chair. My rage was sated by perceiving that I had to deal not with any grandson of Jason's foe, but with the actual original Peter Williams himself! I was beholding one who had been honored by the fists of Jason Sanders. He was too precious a serpent not to draw him with cunning. Filially, I pursued:

"I was told—I once spent a summer on Cape Cod—"

"Who are you, young man?"

"Smith, William Smith. I am a—traveling salesman."

"Well, well, let 's have it."

"I was told you came from the Cape—from Kennuit."

"Who told ye?"

"Really, I can't seem for the moment to remember."

"Well, what of it?"

"I just wondered if you were n't the son of the Reverend Abner Williams who used to be pastor in Kennuit way back about 1840."

"I be. I am the son in the spirit of that man of holiness."

Cautiously, oh, so cautiously, simulating veneration, I hinted:

"Then you must have known this fellow I 've been reading about; this Jason—what was it?—Sandwich?"

"Jason Sanders. Yes, sir, I knew him well, too well. A viler wretch never lived. A wine-bibber, a man of wrath, blind to the inner grace, he was all that I seek to destroy." Williams's voice loomed like a cathedral service. I hated him, yet I was impressed. I ventured:

"One thing I 've often wondered. They say this Sanders fellow did n't really die in Greece. I wonder when and where he did die."

The old man was laughing; he was wrinkling his eyes at me; he was shaking.

"You 're daft, but you have grit. I know who you be. Edgerton telegraphed me you were coming. So you like Jason, eh?"

"I do."

"I tell you he was a thief, a drunkard—"

"And I tell you he was a genius!"

"You tell me! Huh!"

"See here, what reason has there been for your dogging Jason? It was n't just your boyish fighting and—how did you find out what became of him after he left Kennuit?"

The old man looked at me as though I were a bug. He answered slowly, with a drawl maddening to my impatience—impatience so whelming now that my spine was cold, my abdomen constricted.

"I know it because in his prison,—" he stopped, yawned, rubbed his jaw,—"in his cell I wrestled with the evil spirit in him."

"You won?"

"I did."

"But after that—when did he die?" I asked.

"He did n't."

"You mean Jason is alive now, sixty years after—"

"He 's ninety-five years old. You see, I 'm—I was till I rechristened myself Williams—I 'm Jason Sanders," he replied.

Then for two thousand miles, by village street and way-train and limited, sitting unmoving in berths and silent in smoking-rooms, I fled to the cool solace of Quinta Gates.